

the worm under the skin

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I think it was my idea to play Spies. Rosa says it was hers, but I think I'm right, because I'm usually the one who has ideas. We had secret code numbers and secret identities, and codebreaker notebooks. I was Total Energy 008, Ian was Destructivate 003; Jordan was Death Angel 000. Tom was Klingon 009 and Danny was The Beast With No Number. Rosa was the agency chief, and just called 'R'. We left messages for each other in our code in secret places, and gathered intelligence every playtime.

We had a stroke of luck straight away, because I saw Andrew, a boy in top juniors, doing something very mysterious on the first day after we set up the agency. As he was coming out of dinner he took something out of his pocket. I saw a glow coming from between his fingers, and then he kind of hunched against the wall, and seemed to mutter into his hand. I saw a tiny metallic aerial extend itself, and then a green ray came down through the wall, in ripples, and zinged into Andrew's head.

We decided he was probably communicating with aliens, who were controlling him. We followed him around the playground, signalling to each other and making notes of what he did and who he talked to. Everything went well, until he spotted us. This was Ian's fault. Rosa and I had trailed Andrew to the bench by the main entrance, and we were observing him – but *carefully*, because he's one of the biggest kids in our playground and he has a nasty temper. Then Ian had to go and sit right next to him.

Andrew glared at him and said 'Get lost.'

Ian said – afterwards – that he'd seen something green

coiling out from under Andrew's jacket, and he tried to take a sample of it in case it was an alien device. Rosa and I had scooted, even though he hadn't noticed us, because Andrew doesn't warn you twice. But we saw Ian pulling on something, and we yelled 'Ian! don't do that!' Andrew rolled his eyes and ground his teeth so fiercely that I could hear them from across the playground. Suddenly he grabbed Ian by the throat and started to strangle him. Strangling is Andrew's usual form of attack. He was shouting 'I told you to get lost, you stupid little oik!' Ian couldn't get lost, because he was being held down and strangled, and his head was being bashed against the bench. His face was going purple, which is a sign of the most severe stage of an Andrew strangle. I thought I'd better go and fetch Mrs Martin, the dinner lady.

Well, Mrs Martin rescued Ian, and it turned out that what Ian had been pulling was a loose thread from Andrew's jumper. Andrew said we'd been following him and staring at him and then Ian had started mutilating his clothes, and Mrs Martin told us off, even though it was Ian who had been strangled.

Rosa said Mrs Martin must be on the aliens' side, so next day we investigated her instead. It was our best operation yet. One of us was always right behind her where ever she went; and we took notes of all her suspicious behaviour. I didn't think a dinner lady would be controlled by aliens, because it's a very responsible job (being a dinner lady, I mean). But I was wrong. She had been taken over. I was the one who spotted the green light zinging in her eyes. But we all saw the dead human hand in her shopping bag. It was a disgusting sight: the fingernails were blue and the fingers were all pink and flobby and swollen up by alien poison. Rosa distracted her by pretending to have a cut,

while Ian and I tried to get the hand from her bag. The others kept watch, ready to run to our aid on a secret signal. All was going well when suddenly Mrs Martin leapt on me, grabbed me by the arm and yelled.

'I've had enough! You're coming to see Mrs Anderson! All three of you, you pestering little monkeys.'

There were only three of us because the others got away. Mrs Martin marched us straight to Mrs Anderson's office. She's our head teacher. She listened to Mrs Martin, who told her we'd been deliberately making her life a misery.

'They followed me to the toilet!' she said. 'They were waiting outside, and that little Rosa dived straight in after me when I came out! It's unbearable!'

'It could have been a mail-drop,' I explained, 'We had to find out if she'd left a secret message for her alien controllers.'

'And then they tried to steal my bag!'

We all stared at each other, amazed. It was a typical alien trick, to accuse us of a crime. 'She's got a dead human hand in there!' blurted Ian. Somehow, I knew this was a mistake. And I was right. He should have kept quiet. Mrs Martin looked very cross, and pulled out of her bag a squashy package of pink sausages. Now I *know* it was a hand before, but aliens can do that sort of thing. They can change the appearance of things, or make you forget that you saw anything strange, or make you remember things that never happened. They do it all the time. I was exasperated with Ian. But actually it helped, because Mrs Anderson laughed, and even Mrs Martin smiled.

Mrs Anderson said to me, 'I expect this was all *your* idea, Charlie. Your imagination's going to get you in real trouble, one of these days. Go on, back to the playground.'

But if I have any more complaints, spying and alien-hunting will be banned.'

Teachers always think it's my idea, whatever happens. On my last report Mrs Dale, who was our teacher last year, wrote: *Charlie has a vivid imagination*. I asked my mother what *vivid* meant. I had a feeling Mrs Dale was talking about the way I always have a good genuine explanation, every time anything goes wrong. She used to tell me I was a genius for excuses. My mother said '*It means lively. It means you make your ideas come alive.*' It sounds all right, doesn't it? You wouldn't think that could be a problem. But it is.

Danny didn't want to play spies any more after Ian got strangled. Then Rosa and Jordan fell out about a marble that Jordan borrowed without asking, so Rosa, as the chief spy, took her 00 number away. Jordan resigned in protest. And Tom wanted to be a Klingon, not a secret agent, so he stopped playing too. But me and Rosa and Ian kept on. I honestly don't remember who first decided to investigate the hole in the wall. I don't *think* it was me: but maybe it was.

The hole was in the wall by the drinking fountain, outside the Assembly Hall entrance. It was thirty-four centimetres off the ground, and ninety centimetres from the bowl of the drinking fountain. It was seven centimetres high and roughly ten centimetres wide, or the other way round depending on how you looked at it: big enough to get a hand inside, but quite a tight fit. The strange thing about this hole was that none of us could remember how long it had been there. Ian said it must be something to do with the drinking fountain, and he thought there'd been a pipe going into the wall there at one time. But none of us could remember seeing a pipe,

and surely the building supervisor would have mended the hole if anyone knew it was there.

It was deep. You couldn't see anything inside if you looked straight in. If you looked sideways, so a glimmer of light could get past your face, you could see something whitish lying in the depths. We were sure it was a piece of folded paper, almost certainly a secret message left by another gang of spies. Or the aliens. Ian even hoped it might be money. Rosa had the smallest hand. She tried to reach it, but she couldn't. Then Ian tried, and he couldn't either. I was afraid of getting my hand stuck, and anyway we obviously needed some proper equipment.

The next day we all brought the equipment we thought would help. Ian brought his torch, Rosa brought a piece of string with a magnet tied to the end of it (in case there was something metal down there), and I brought my red-plastic tweezers from my Earth Discovery science kit that I got for my birthday. Ian's torch hardly showed up by daylight. We couldn't see more than without it: just a blur. Then we tried to dangle the string into the hole. It kept catching on the bricks; and the magnet, which was a very small one, wasn't heavy enough to weigh it down. So we tied a bent safety pin – that Rosa happened to have fastening one of her cuffs – to the end instead, and dropped it in. But it didn't bring up anything.

Then I gave Ian my tweezers, so that he could reach into the hole with them.

I didn't want to do it myself. I'd been starting to get some funny ideas about this hole. There was something strange about a hole that just appeared in a wall, for no reason. I'd begun to wonder what could have made a hole like that. Something that ate bricks? I started to think about getting your hand stuck in there ... and what if

there was something inside that was alive and had sharp teeth? I couldn't stop thinking about something being down there, that could grab and bite you. I don't know where these ideas I get come from, they just come.

'I can get my hand far enough,' reported Ian. He was excited. 'I'm reaching the bottom. Hey, this is going to work! We're going to get it out!'

'I wondered what's really in there,' muttered Rosa. 'It might not be a message. Maybe it's a five pound note. Or a bus ticket, or a sweet wrapper.'

'Maybe it's something alive,' I whispered. 'Something evil and foul. And *hungry*.'

Rosa groaned and pulled a face at me. 'Trust you, Charlie.'

She thought I was making it up. But I could *see* it in my mind. Something evil and pale and foul and slimy, coiled up in the darkness ...

Just at that moment, Ian gave a yell, and jerked himself backwards.

'What's the matter!' we cried.

He was sitting on the ground, with his mouth graping open. My red tweezers lay on the tarmac where he'd dropped them. But they weren't all there. *Something* had bitten or broken off one of the arms, leaving only half a pair of tweezers behind.

'Something grabbed them!' gasped Ian. 'It suddenly grabbed them!'

Rosa picked up the tweezers and stared at them in amazement. 'They're completely ruined,' she announced in disgust. 'Now we're never going to be able to get it out, whatever it is. Ian, I'm going to demote you for ruining the agency's equipment.'

'I didn't!' protested Ian, 'And you're always demoting people, I'm sick of it -'

They were so busy yelling at each other, they'd forgotten about the hole. But I hadn't. I saw what was happening.

'Look!' I moaned. 'Look! *It's coming out!*'

Then they both saw it too. Something whitish had appeared, filling up the black space of the hole. It was slimy-looking, and it gleamed. It didn't have any eyes. It had a snaky head that moved, swaying to and fro as if it was sniffing the air. When it lifted its head up, you could see on the underside a round mouth, with rows of suckers and tiny sharp teeth. It oozed down the wall, getting longer as it moved and shrinking back on itself between surges. It was a white, blind worm, about as long as my arm. It reached the ground and squatted in a heap, right in front of Ian. He was still sitting there, getting his trousers damp on the cold tarmac. The head with the horrible sucker-mouth groped about.

Rosa made a noise like: 'NNNNNNggghhh -'

'Don't touch it!' I wailed.

It was the worst thing I could have said. Ian could never resist doing anything stupid, once he'd been told not to do it. So I knew exactly what was going to happen, the moment before it did. Ian reached out and poked the white worm with his bare fingers. It reared back, growing longer and reaching up into the air, like a cobra getting ready to strike.

'Don't pick it up!' squealed Rosa. 'Don't!'

He didn't have to. The worm shot forward, and sank its sucker teeth into Ian's hand. That's when the really terrible thing happened. It disappeared. One moment it was there, clinging to his hand like a monstrous white

leech: and Ian was staring at it, going pop-eyed with horror. Next moment it had gone. It had vanished *under his skin*.

The three of us stood gaping at each other. For a moment I thought of running away. I could go and find Tom and Danny, and play with them instead. I wanted to say: *let's stop pretending. It was my vivid imagination. It isn't true. There was no worm. Let's go and do something else.*

Ian said, in a very weird, faint voice, *'Is it real, Charlie?'*

He dragged up the arm of his jumper, and then I could see it too. The worm was moving, squirming, up Ian's arm under the skin, until it disappeared under his sleeve. I told them what I could see –

'It's got to your shoulder. It's going down your ribs –'

Ian began to cry. Rosa looked as if she was going to be sick. I expect I looked the same. *'Fetch someone! Fetch someone!'* she yelled at me. *'Call an ambulance!'*

Ian had hold of his belly, and all the blood had drained from his face, leaving it a horrible greeny-grey colour. I could see the front of his jumper moving hideously between his hands. When I told him that, his eyes turned up, and he flopped over onto the ground. He'd fainted.

Rosa gave another moan and suddenly bolted, running across the playground and yelling for Mrs Martin at the top of her voice.

I stayed with Ian.

So that was how the three of us ended up in Mrs Anderson's office again for the second time in three days, which was a record even for me. Ian was lying on the couch where people were allowed to lie when they were sick in school and waiting for someone to fetch them home. He was still in a faint or something. Mrs Anderson asked us to tell her exactly what had happened.

‘Don’t leave anything out,’ she said. ‘It could be very, very important.’

So we told her about the hole in the wall, and our investigation. And I explained how I’d thought of the white worm, because I just couldn’t help it: and then it had appeared, and Ian had poked it, and it oozed into his hand. She asked us did anything else happen: did he swallow something, did he hit his head, did he feel ill before the worm incident, did anyone strangle him? But we said no and I think in the end she believed us. I was very glad of that because if the doctors didn’t believe it was the worm I didn’t see how they could save Ian – if there was any chance for him at all.

‘All right,’ said Mrs Anderson. ‘I don’t think *you* would tell me a lie, Rosa.’ (Which I thought was unfair: as if I *would*. I can’t help having an imagination.) She went and looked at Ian, who was still lying on the couch. She felt his tummy, and his forehead. I saw his eyelids flicker but he didn’t move. Rosa and I were holding hands. I think we were both feeling as awful as possible: Rosa admitted afterwards that she really thought Ian might die.

‘Maybe we’ll have to send for an ambulance. But first I’m going to try some First Aid. You know, I went back to the Philippines for my last holidays.’

Mrs Anderson comes from the Philippines, originally. That’s why we have a model of an ocean-going catamaran in our school’s front hall, and a few other things like that. She says Philippine islanders have sailed all over the Pacific Ocean. I don’t see how they did it, if they only have things like that model catamaran. It looks more like an exploded hen coop than a boat. But she’s a headmistress, so I suppose it must be true.

‘When I was there,’ she said, ‘I went to see an uncle of

mine who is a magic doctor. He cures people in all sorts of ways, sometimes by just talking to them. Sometimes a good talking-to can heal a person. In special cases, he can do a kind of surgery that doesn't need any knives or special instruments. He can reach into peoples' bodies and draw out whatever it is that's making them ill. He gave me some lessons. I'm not sure if this will work, but I'm going to have a try at helping Ian.'

She went to the washbasin that was in another corner of the office, washed her hands carefully and dried them. Then she came back to the couch, took several deep breaths and laid her hands on Ian's tummy. The worm seemed to be quiet in there now, I couldn't see it moving. 'Lie very still, Ian,' she said, in a soft voice. 'Don't be afraid. Just breathe quietly.'

She pulled up his jumper, unbuttoned his shirt and pushed up his vest, so she could put her hands on his bare skin. The worm made a bulge in the dented down place you can feel between your two lots of ribs when you are lying on your back, as Ian was. I could see the ripples of its coils. Mrs Anderson moved her hands over it.

'Hmm.' she said. 'Yes, I think I can tackle the problem.'

Then *I saw her hands go into him*. It was as if she was dipping them into water, or into the thick foam on the top of a bowl of washing up. They went in, and disappeared almost to the wrist. There was a moment's pause, and then she pulled out the worm. She hauled it up into the air, until it was all out of him. It wriggled and writhed horribly, trying to get its sucker-mouth fixed on *her*. But she didn't give it a chance. Mrs Anderson isn't squeamish at all. I couldn't have done this myself, but she actually pulled hard on its head, and wrung its slimy neck as if it

was a chicken. I heard a snap and the worm went limp. She crumpled it up, and tossed it into the wastebin.

'There,' she said. 'That should do the trick.'

'Did it ...' Rosa quavered. 'Did it do any damage to him?'

'None at all. I got to it just in time.'

A moment later, Ian stirred and opened his eyes. 'What happened?' he said. 'Where am I?'

He had to go home anyway. I think it's the law, if a child has fainted at school. But his face had gone back to its normal colour before they took him away, and I knew he would be all right, because I'd seen what happened to the worm. And he was.

We've given up playing spies, and have gone back to playing *Aladdin*. It's not so exciting but it's safer. Mrs Anderson had a very serious talk with me, the day that the White Worm attacked Ian. I promised that I would try to stop imagining things, and if I *had to* imagine things, I would keep them to myself. I've been trying really hard. But it isn't easy.

The hole in the wall has been filled in. There's no sign of it now except a cleaner patch of mortar between the bricks by the drinking fountain, that is already starting to turn grubby as the rest of the wall. If anything still lies hidden there, it can't get out.

But the other day when I was coming into school, I noticed there's a crack in the tarmac by the gates, where I'm sure there was no crack before. I've started thinking about the things that are down there. They're long and slithery and a blackish-red colour, and they have lots of legs. They're climbing over each other, trying to get out, and snapping their poisonous jaws. There's too many to

count. If they get out, I don't know what might happen. They could swarm all over the playground. They might climb into peoples' ears, and chew out their brains. I don't want to imagine them, I'm trying not to. But I can't help it: and the crack is getting wider every day.

It just shows you, teachers ought to be more careful what they write on reports. A word that makes ideas come alive can be very dangerous.